

# The Humpback Whale, *Megaptera novaeangliae* (Borowski, 1781), a First Stranding For Port Phillip Bay, Victoria.

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On 14 December, 1980 an immature female Humpback whale, *Megaptera novaeangliae* stranded at Bonbeach, Port Phillip Bay, Victoria (38° 04' S, 145° 07' E). A bayside resident Mr R. Shipley reported to the National Museum of Victoria after the stranding that he had observed a single whale rubbing itself under his boat in the Sandringham area 6 December. It is likely that this was the same animal.

I visited the site 15 December with a team to assist in general observation and collection of biological material. The animal was badly decomposed, and obviously had been dead for some time. The skin was sloughing badly, altering the colour pattern considerably. It was readily identifiable as *Megaptera novaeangliae* by its elongated irregularly-bordered flippers, black above and white below (Plate 1). It is usual for animals frequenting the east coast of Australia to exhibit less pigmentation than those from other areas (Chittleborough, 1965).

The specimen was photographed by the research team, and by the media, measurements made (Table 1) and ectoparasites collected from the body. These were subsequently identified as whale lice *Cyamus? balaenopterae*. The skull and baleen were salvaged and the rest of the carcass removed and buried by local Council authorities. The fragmented skull and baleen are now lodged in the National Museum of Victoria, registered number C 24956.

The Scientific Event Alert Network, Smithsonian Institution was notified and the event reported in SEAN (1981).

## Humpback whale records on Australian coasts

Brazenor (1950) commented that there were several records of the species being stranded on the Victorian coast. The only known material to support his statement is a piece of baleen from Cape Woolamai, Phillip Island collected about 1940 (NMV registered number C24961).

Wakefield (1967) commented that two "humpers" were caught in Portland Bay 30 June 1843 and 25 July 1844 and reported in the Portland Guardian. There is a report that a humpback was harpooned but escaped in Portland Bay 20 June 1859.

Victorian sightings in recent years by R. M. Warneke include a specimen off Cape Conran in 1979, five specimens on the east coast in 1980, and a single specimen off Cape Conran in 1981. All sightings were reported between June and November, and all located east of Port Phillip Bay.

Wood Jones (1925) reported that a specimen was stranded at Corny Point, Yorke Peninsula and that its skeleton was preserved in the "State Museum". This refers to the South Australian Museum, but Aitken (1971) mentioned that the species was represented by scapula and humerus only in that museum, registered M5120, and that it was collected prior to November 1943 on the west coast of South Australia.

Strandings of the species in the Great Australian Bight were considered rare by Dawbin (1966), explained by the fact that the annual migratory route of these whales takes them from the Antarctic to Australia in autumn, and their return to the south in spring does not take them through the Bight. This is dealt with in detail by Chittleborough (1965). He

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Plate 1. — Stranded *Megaptera novaeangliae* C 24956 at Bonbeach 15 December, 1981. Photo: D. Parsons.



Plate 2. — Baleen plates from *Megaptera novaeangliae* C 24956. Photo: D. Parsons.

Table 1

Measurements of *Megaptera novaeangliae* (modified from Baker, 1972).

1. Length, total	6.37m
2. Length, tip of upper jaw to centre of eye	1.38m
3. Length of gape (tip of upper jaw to corner of mouth)	1.22m
4. Length, tip of upper jaw to blowhole	1.96m
5. Length, tip of upper jaw to anterior insertion of flipper	1.95m
6. Length, tip of upper jaw to centre of anus	4.48m
7. Girth, maximum (2.4m from tip of snout)	4.10m
8. Length, flipper (anterior insertion to tip)	2.05m
9. Width, flipper (maximum)	0.05m
10. Width of tail flukes (tip to tip)	2.1m
11. Depth of notch between flukes	0.11m

Other measurements given by Baker, the length from the tip of the upper jaw to the tip of the dorsal fin and the height of the dorsal fin were not made because of the position of the stranded animal.

At the level of the dorsal fin, 21 ventral grooves were evident, and at the eye 26.

recorded two sightings along the South Australian coast, one at the head of the Great Australian Bight in 1952 and a female with a newly born calf off St. Vincent Gulf in winter 1961.

Guiler (1978) reported a number of Tasmanian records from Bass Strait by Lord and Scott (1924), Circular Head (Scott, 1942), sightings at Marion Bay October, 1953, Fortescue Bay January, 1958, and Darlington, Maria island 25-26 April 1969, when a cow and calf were seen at sea. None of these records are substantiated by museum reference material.

Bryden (1978) reported that humpback whales are seen regularly off the coast of Queensland in winter, and once supported a commercial industry there. He observed four humpbacks including one calf at Point Danger in October 1976 and had notification of a group of fifteen animals from the air made by Mr R. Latham. There is a report that a humpback became entangled in a shark net in Southport Bay about 1972, and when released it slowly swam away.

Bannister has reported (pers. comm.) that there have been two humpback strandings on the coast of Western Australia in the past fifteen years. Both occurred in 1977, one a male stranded at Cottesloe on 9 November, from which baleen was washed up and identified, the other about 11.9 m long was located

five miles east of Augusta on the south coast about 8 December. This specimen was stranded alive, but the location was inaccessible. No reference material other than baleen was obtained from either animal and this is now located in the Western Australian Museum.

In the southern hemisphere, humpbacks assemble in warm waters for breeding during winter, and then move south to form summer feeding groups (Dawbin, 1966). Their tendency to travel along shore lines was exploited on the east coast when the Tangalooma and other whaling stations were established. Chittleborough (1965) reported that a total of 18,180 humpback whales were collected at Australian shore stations and Antarctic areas between 1949-62. He noted that despite the fact that most humpback whales have left the Australian coast by the end of October, some animals have been sighted in these waters during November and December. Three separate females which were migrating southwards along the coast in December had probably been late in making the northward migration. Each was accompanied by a calf. The Bonbeach specimen, obviously juvenile, may have been separated from its mother in their attempts to reach summer feeding grounds in the Antarctic.

There is a wealth of statistical information available on the species, but

regrettably little biological material has been collected and lodged in museum reference collections.

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